

Bloom by **castlxbyers**

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Summary:

On his journey of searching for a solution to his family issues, for the first time in forever, Richie finds acceptance, friendship and maybe even love.

Bloom

- *Help me mute the silence* -

At a crossing just outside Derry high school, the rock finally fell into a drain. Richie swore quietly. It had traveled along the road, kick by kick, for three, almost four miles all the way from the front yard of the Tozier house and been the absolute highlight of his morning.

Simply not being able to just let it be, he stretched to take a look at the sewer, half involuntarily, only for his eyes to see what his mind knew already — about twenty feet worth of nothing but darkness and a narrow layer of water at the bottom.

He sighed. If it hadn't been for his scumbag of a father, he wouldn't have even been giving two damns about a stupid rock. He would've been *biking* to school – as a matter of fact, he would've already been there.

His mother had offered him a lift, though, but after last night he didn't feel like sitting in the car with her, pretending. Pretending to have the perfect family, to not know why she was wearing a woolen turtleneck in August, pretending to be happy.

Passing by a bunch of students handing out brochures on top of the school stairs, he walked inside. The semester had begun just a few days before and recruiting was at its zenith. Much to his mother's chagrin, Richie hadn't joined any of the extracurricular clubs his first year and had made it clear he wasn't planning on doing so on his second either. Photographing for the yearbook was quite enough.

Despite common belief, he was actually brilliant – a straight-A student, to be exact. He didn't show much of his intellect at school, but at home he studied religiously for several hours every night, then scoring the highest in almost all of his tests. It never failed to astonish his teachers how the boy with the foulest mouth and little to no interest in anything that was going on in the classroom was still among the brightest student the school had to offer, and for the longest time he was, in fact, kept under special surveillance as a suspect for cheating.

When the truth had finally occurred, he had been deeply apologized to and soon transferred to all their advanced classes. But Richie hadn't minded the monitoring – at least he'd been getting the attention he so desperately craved yet never really got from his parents.

On his way to history, staring at his feet to avoid accidental eye contact, he bumped into a boy just a couple of inches shorter than him, causing the leaflets in the boy's hands to fly in the air and slowly float back down on the floor.

"Shit, shit, shit." The boy crouched down, his fluffy curls bouncing gently, and started gathering his belongings before they got all crumpled up.

Richie knelt beside him and grabbed a handful of papers. He glanced at the one topmost in the pile, his brows puckering. "What the dick is this? A bird club?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking about starting one."

"A *bird club*," Richie repeated, eyeing the introduction under the heading. 'Stanley Uris welcomes you to the first-ever Bird Club meeting of Derry high school. You don't have to be an expert or even own a pair of binoculars to join – all you need is patience and curiosity.'

"You don't think it's a good idea?"

Richie looked at him and about a dozen insulting responses ran through his mind. But quite possibly for the first time in his life, after seeing the gutted expression on the other boy's face, he shook them off and said, "No, I think it's great."

A petite smile grew across Stanley's face, "Thanks."

The two got up and Richie handed the fliers back to their rightful owner. "Well, good luck with your club."

Stanley bit his lower lip and glimpsed down at the papers, then up at Richie again. "Why don't you take one of these?"

"Do I look like I care about fucking birds?" he sneered but took the pamphlet from the boy's extended hand anyway. "I'm only taking this so you don't have to take all two hundred copies back home with you."

"Just come check it out," Stanley smiled, "who knows, maybe you're more of a birder than you think." Then he turned around, leaving the taller boy standing in the middle of the hallway in pure bafflement.

Richie had no memory of ever so much as seeing Stanley before in his life. It wasn't that uncommon, really – he barely paid attention to his classmates. But you'd think that a kid wearing the kind of formal clothes usually only seen on men over sixty, a striped light green polo shirt and a pair of khakis, would've stuck out like a sore thumb.

He watched as the bird enthusiast slowly disappeared into the crowd and shook his head. *Great marketing, Stanley Uris*, he thought to himself and grinned. *Urine*.

"What's so funny, Four Eyes?"

Richie stiffened. He could've recognized that voice anywhere.

Henry Bowers had been his most eager, resilient bully since primary school. It had started out as viperish comments about his looks – thick black glasses and buck front teeth which had finally been fixed when he started middle school – but soon grown to be much more violent.

Richie's loud mouth had only vexed his tormentor and made him the target of all his anger. When Henry had realized Richie wasn't afraid of him and that someday he might actually defeat him, he had stopped coming at him alone. Instead, he had formed a group, the Bowers' Gang, consisting of his equally moronic best friends Patrick Hockstetter, Vic Criss and Belch Huggins who together had continued making Richie's life a living hell.

Quickly, Richie tried to shove the paper into the front pocket of his worn-out jeans but his wrist was grasped and the flier yanked out of his hand.

"Whatcha got there?" Patrick jeered, unwrapping the pamphlet. Soon he started guffawing. "You into birds, Trashmouth?"

Henry glanced at the paper and smirked, "Yeah, what's your type? Ostrich?"

"Eider," Richie snorted, "just saw one yesterday. Mrs. Bowers I believe they called it."

With a force, Henry grabbed the breast of his grey t-shirt and jerked him toward the wall behind him. "What did you say?"

Richie smiled impishly as Henry's breath steamed his glasses, "I think you heard me."

"You think you're so funny, don't you?" Henry's grip loosened. "Making these pathetic jokes day after day, thinking people are actually laughing *with* you... Oh, what a fairyland you must live in." He squeezed his hand into a fist, then releasing it just as quickly. "But this... This is reality."

Suddenly, Richie was pushed against the wall again, his head banging on the concrete. The following punch threw his glasses on the floor and brought a taste of blood to his mouth. Several other kicks and hits followed, each of them stronger than the last.

"Hey!" A sharp manly voice echoed in the hallway. "I think that's enough, guys."

Henry grunted, finally letting go of Richie's neck, "Fine."

Richie slumped on the ground, gasping for air. He fumbled for his glasses, crawling on the floor, but as he heard a cracking sound, his hand froze. Followed by a gust of mischievous laughter, his glasses were slammed onto his palm in two pieces.

"See ya around, Tozier," Henry smirked as the boys walked off the scene.

Grunting, Richie sat up and leaned his back against the chilly wall. His body hurt everywhere. But even with all the bruises and cuts, it was inside where he hurt the most.

He had never seized up like that before. He always had something to say, an insult to shoot or a joke to crack – hence his nickname. In fact, it was a commonly known verity that keeping his mouth shut was close to impossible for him.

Usually, he had no problem defending himself against the Bowers' Gang. He had wit and in some bizarre level, he actually enjoyed agitating them. Even fighting was something he had learned to be quite good at. He didn't win every time – not even close – but he sure was a good opponent. He was mostly bones, tall and thin, but his fast movements and long legs made up for it. He wasn't afraid to punch back but was just as quick to run away if needed.

Still, freezing like that in front of Henry Bowers of all people... It had nothing to do with being scared or surprised. He hadn't been caught off guard – he was always prepared for a war of words.

No. It was because instead of childish insults and empty threats, Henry had finally said out loud exactly what had always been on Richie's mind, making his fear of being a meaningless nobody, a public laughing-stock who no one wanted anything to do with, come true.

"You alright, Chard?" the manly voice woke him back to reality.

Richie lifted his mangled face, on which was an irked scorn, "I've told you not to call me that."

Disregarding his comment with a roll of eyes, the boy offered him his arm. Reluctantly, Richie latched to it, letting go as soon as he was standing steadily again.

"You gotta learn how to stand up for yourself, kid," the boy sighed, "I'm getting awfully tired of saving your sorry ass every time you let them beat you up like that."

Richie scoffed. "Or maybe you could, I don't know, tell your friends to stop harassing me?"

The boy's chestnut eyes rolled afresh. "Just stop being such a pain in everyone's ass and lay low like the rest of the losers." Then, with no

intention of staying to chat, the boy whipped his bag across his shoulder and shot Richie one last glare. "Clean yourself up before going to class."

He turned around and hollered at a bunch of jocks to wait for him, the navy blue satchel bouncing on his back as he jogged toward them.

Richie stared after the gang, an overly familiar feeling of envy and bitterness slowly creeping up to him, and couldn't stop himself from picturing that kind of life for himself. Friends, belonging, happiness...

Sighing, he grabbed his ragged backpack and dropped the pieces of his eyewear into his pocket. "Always nice catching up, big brother."